WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

Focus

Agriculture Related Water Quality Complaints

Background

The Department of Ecology (Ecology) is responsible for water pollution control in Washington State and has made considerable progress during the last 20 years to prevent and correct water quality problems involving "point sources" of pollution. Examples of point sources are municipal sewage treatment plants and industries that discharge wastes from the end of a pipe.

Much less progress has been made correcting "nonpoint sources" of pollution. Nonpoint sources involve polluted runoff entering streams or lakes or leaching to underground water. Examples are stormwater runoff from cities and highways, soil erosion from forest practices, failing septic systems, and contaminated runoff from agricultural lands.

Nonpoint sources are the leading cause of water pollution across the nation and in Washington State. Technical studies in our state show that farms, producing crops and raising livestock, can contribute to water pollution. This is particularly true when runoff from several small farms in one watershed combine to create an even greater water quality problem.

To help address agricultural sources of water pollution the Washington Conservation Commission, local conservation districts (CDs) and Ecology entered into the Agricultural Compliance Memorandum of Agreement (Agreement) in 1988.

Agricultural Compliance Memorandum of Agreement

The Agreement defines a consistent series of steps that coordinate Ecology's water pollution control responsibilities with CD programs that provide technical assistance to landowners and farm operators. Through the local CD office, a farm owner or operator may receive technical assistance to help develop and implement a water quality management plan, or "farm plan." Farm plans identify reasonable and economical ways to manage the farm to prevent or correct water pollution problems.

Water quality management issues on commercial dairy farms are addressed under a separate program, the 1998 Dairy Nutrient Management Act. Under this Act, all farms are required to develop and implement dairy nutrient management plans by December 2003, and those that have documented water quality problems are required to obtain coverage under the statewide Dairy Waste General Discharge Permit.

How Does the Agreement Process Work?

The following series of steps are followed if Ecology receives a water quality complaint involving a farm:

1. Ecology's regional water quality staff will contact the landowner or operator and visit the site to verify if the complaint is valid or not. If the problem does not exist at the time of the visit the complaint may be dismissed, a second visit may be scheduled, or potential problems will be identified. If potential problems are identified, then technical assistance will be offered.

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2. If a pollution problem is verified, the farm will be referred to the local CD for assistance. If the problem is an immediate threat or substantial potential threat to public health or water quality, the Agreement commits Ecology to require immediate corrective action.

3. If the problem is not considered an immediate threat, the farm is referred to the local CD and the farmer will have up to six (6) months to work cooperatively with the CD to develop a farm plan. Alternatively, the farm owner may choose to develop and implement a farm plan on his or her own or with help from a private consultant. After a farm plan is developed, the landowner then has up to an additional 18 months to fully implement the plan. Ecology may use shorter timelines if this is reasonable.

4. If the farm owner chooses not to work cooperatively with Ecology or the CD to correct the problem(s), the Agreement specifies that Ecology will take the appropriate action, which may include formal enforcement. To date, fewer than 10 percent of the farms referred to CDs for assistance have resulted in formal enforcement action.

What is a Farm Plan?

A farm plan describes how the farm and animals can be managed to prevent pollution of surface or ground water. The plan identifies the necessary steps, or Best Management Practices (BMPs), recommended to prevent or correct a water pollution problem. The BMPs are tailored to the specific need and situation of each farm. Examples include establishing and maintaining cover crops, pasture rotation, manure storage, installing rain gutters and downspouts or limiting animal access to surface waters (streams, rivers, lakes, etc). Farm plans take into consideration the unique aspects of each farm including seasonal weather conditions, the number and type of animals, quantity of waste produced, land base, crops, and soil types.

Funding for Improvements

Many funding sources are available to assist farm owners and operators in making improvements that will benefit water quality. In 1999, 15 major programs spent an estimated $91.3 million in federal funds and $45.8 million in state funds on local watershed planning, salmon recovery and non-point source control efforts. These funding sources include the Conservation Commission; the Salmon Recovery Board; Ecology; the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); Section 319; and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Local conservation districts are a good source of information on how to obtain financial assistance.

Ecology Staff

Ecology staff are committed to working cooperatively with farm owners and operators to prevent and correct water quality problems and are available through Ecology's regional offices to answer questions or provide technical assistance.

Southwest Regional Office (Lacey)	(360) 407-6300
Northwest Regional Office (Bellevue)	(425) 649-7000
Central Regional Office (Yakima)	(509) 575-2490
Eastern Regional Office (Spokane)	(509) 329-3400

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